

KNAPSACK AND HAVERSACK PACKING 101

by Kevin O'Beirne

"Bring for your men shelter-tents....and drop all excess of baggage."

— Major General John McClernand, Thirteenth Corps, April 21, 1864, Red River Campaign

"Considering...the fact that three days' [rations] has heretofore been the maximum amount [carried], the board recommends as follows: 1. That all extra clothing, except a change of underclothing, be stored. 2. That five days' rations of bread and small-stores be placed in the knapsack. 3. Three days' cooked rations in the haversack, and five days' fresh beef upon the hoof. 4. Two mules per regiment to carry camp-kettles, rice, beans, &c. Each soldier will carry—Haversack 5¼ lbs., Knapsack 6 lbs., Blanket 5¼ lbs., Clothing 2 lbs., Total, 19 lbs. Making 13¼ pounds in the knapsacks, being 2¼ pounds less than the weight usually carried by soldiers in this army in their knapsacks."

— Report of Board of Officers Convened per Army of the Potomac General Orders No. 65, March 7, 1863, prior to the Chancellorsville Campaign

"The troops carried through the campaign only those things most necessary for their constant use.... A blanket should have been taken, but no overcoat. Both weigh a man down too heavily, and are not necessary in moderate weather."

— Brigadier General Rufus Ingalls,
Chief Quartermaster, Army of the Potomac,
May 29, 1863

The average reenactor qualifies as a "heavy camper" and one of the easiest, most satisfying, least-expensive ways to improve your authenticity is to lighten your load and reenact with less. While it includes packing of eight days' rations—more than any reenactor would ever carry—it is interesting to note that the recommendations of the Board of Officers in response to General Orders No. 65 (see above) was adopted by the Army of the Potomac for the Chancellorsville campaign. Reenactors should consider the fine example set by the Federal soldiers of 1863 the next time they pack their gear for a two-day reenactment.

The first resolution to make in lightening your reenactor's load is to use no more than what you can comfortably carry in a single trip, and never bring your car into an encampment site. If the Army of the Potomac could go eight days without issuing rations from wagon trains, then surely a hearty and hale living historian can survive a two-day reenactment without having to use a motor vehicle for anything other than transportation to the event's participant parking lot. Once you arrive at the participants' parking lot, don your traps and knapsack, shoulder your musket, and march into camp. Not only will you be more authentic, but you will also avoid the hazards and traffic problems associated with bringing your vehicle into and out of a campsite.

The second (and final) resolution is to pack so that your knapsack and haversack contain only the essentials, and only items that a soldier of 1861-1865 would have had on campaign. What each man packs is up to the individual, but remember, your pack should be light enough for you to comfortably wear it into each battle scenario during a weekend-long event. If the pack is too heavy to wear to all the battles, then start lightening the load by casting off the non-essentials.

Below is a packing checklist that the author uses to prepare for living history events. Your "essentials" may vary.

Knapsack:

- *1 Blanket:* One good 5 lb., 100 percent wool blanket is all any reenactor needs, even in cold weather. Make sure the blanket is a relatively good size—at least 57 inches by 80 inches.
- *1 Gum Blanket:* Essential for use as a ground cloth, raincoat, or shelter. Make sure that your gum blanket has small grommets instead of the larger, modern grommets sold by many vendors of reproduction equipment. For infantrymen, gum blankets were much more common than ponchos.
- *1 Shelter Half:* Decent shelter halves can be obtained only from several vendors. A proper shelter half should weigh only 1.5 lbs. compared to an actual weight of 4.0 lbs. for a Panther

Lodges shelter half. A shelter half is essential for protection from the elements. Individual soldiers should *not* carry full tents (e.g., two shelter halves) and evidence that triangular end-pieces for dog tents were ever available to the average Billy Yank is exceedingly scant. If tent poles are necessary, improvise when you arrive at your



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campsite.

- *Journal Book and Pencils:* The writer carries this non-essential, personal item, which comes in handy for a soldier on campaign to record his thoughts, write letters home, use as a fire-starter, or to use as “paper” in “an emergency”.
- *Extra Pair of Wool Socks:* Perhaps the soldiers of 1861-1865 did not always have extra socks, but all reenactors should carry a second pair for warmth at night and for health purposes. One extra pair of socks is a small, light addition to your pack.
- *Extra Shirt:* Completely non-essential in the warmer months, an extra shirt is a virtual necessity for colder-weather reenacting.
- *Waistcoat (Vest):* The writer often carries this non-essential item, especially for colder-weather reenacting. The idea that every soldier in the field had a vest is a “reenactor myth”, so take your choice on whether you want to carry one. Vests were not an issue item, and civilian and military-style vests were used in the field.
- *Greatcoat:* Leave the greatcoat home in warm weather (later in the war, soldiers placed them in

storage until the autumn). However, a Federal-issue overcoat for reenacting in the colder months is one of the most useful items in the living historian’s kit. It serves as both a coat and a blanket, and at night the cape can be used to completely cover your face and head for warmth.

- *Small Towel:* Not of the modern-day terrycloth variety, a period-correct towel, such as “Huckabuck” towels sold at Wal-Mart (e.g., unbleached, off-white, plain cotton towels usually sold in a pack of five for \$5.00, in the dishtowel department), or other period-correct reproductions, is useful in washing up your person and gear. Carry a bar of lye soap or, better yet, part of one with the towel.
- *Extra Ammunition:* Pack ammunition correctly in paper packages of ten rounds plus one paper tube with twelve percussion caps. This approach is authentic and takes up the least space in your knapsack.
- *Roll of Twine (String):* About ten to twenty feet of twine or hemp is the soldier’s essential companion for rigging up shelter. Twine used in a living history portrayal should have no modern fibers.
- *Extra Food:* Food for a two- or three-day reenactment should fit in the haversack but, in the event you pack heavy, or are bringing more than three days of food, put the extra into the knapsack.
- *Hygiene Items:* The writer carries a muslin poke bag with a wooden toothbrush, comb, and two small glass vials with corks; one vial contains baking soda for tooth powder, and the other is for sunscreen.
- *“Haversack Stuffers”:* Minimize your haversack stuffers and, to increase room in the haversack—which is primarily for rations—place your “stuffers” into the knapsack. Authentic “stuffers” a soldier might well have carried include a photograph of his family, razor, religious items such as a pocket Bible or rosary), sewing kit, a few pieces of dry kindling, pipe and tobacco, and other personal items. Evaluate all your stuffers and determine if they are “essential” for a soldier on campaign. Chances are, after some soul-searching, you will decide that most of your stuffers—especially “necessary” flasks—are useless trash that take up important room in your pack. Other “stuffers” and personal items can also be authentically and conveniently carried in your pockets. Civil War soldiers loved pockets

and often field-modified their uniforms by adding pockets.



A SERIOUS MISCALCULATION.

Haversack:

- *Rations:* Limiting campaign-rations primarily to salt pork, hardtack, coffee, and unrefined sugar not only makes one more authentic, but these items take up less room and weigh less than the rations consumed by most reenactors. Forget about canned food!
- *Tin Plate:* A good tin plate is essential as a serving dish, frying pan and, if necessary, digging implement for fire pits or fortifications. Assuming it fits into your bread bag, a plate adds rigidity to your haversack. A canteen half will serve the same purpose as a plate.
- *Eating Utensils:* A knife, fork, and spoon are essential, and living historians may want to consider wrapping them in a rag or in a small canvas sack. Also, a pocketknife in your pants pocket or haversack is essential.
- *Tin Can:* A period-correct tin can with a wire bail attached is excellent for use as a coffee cooler and as supplemental mess gear.
- *Candle:* One beeswax candle is essential. A candleholder is not required but, if you do opt for one, make it as small as possible and carry it in

the knapsack. As a less-bulky, more authentic alternative, an upside-down mess cup makes an excellent candleholder.

- *Matches and Matchsafe:* It is a good idea for each reenactor to carry one box of matches in a matchsafe (i.e. a small box that protects the box of matches from being crushed). Matchsafes are most easily carried in a jacket pocket. Reproduction matchsafes are generally not very correct but, with some careful shopping at an antique store or relic vendor, one can find a fairly inexpensive period matchsafe.
- *Rags:* Carry one or two period-correct rags—not the modern blue or red bandannas sold by mainstream vendors. These will come in handy as potholders, clean-up wipes, &c.

To lighten their load while on campaign, soldiers occasionally discarded their knapsack. Blanket rolls are lighter than knapsacks and result in less abrasion on one's shoulders. The disadvantage of a blanket roll is that its contents are scattered when the blanket is unrolled for the night. As a practicality, do not carry your gum blanket rolled up as part of your blanket roll, because it will be uncomfortably hot in the sun and, in the rain, it is unavailable for use while you are marching.

The words of the soldiers of 1861-1865 best explain how blanket rolls were made. A member of the Army of the Potomac's 9th Massachusetts Infantry recounted,

"The inventive genius of some produced what was termed the 'horse collar.' An army blanket was spread on the ground and a few necessary articles of clothing selected from the discarded knapsack and spread thereon; then the blanket and its contents were carefully and tightly rolled up, the ends brought together and firmly tied. This singular roll was put on over the head and rested on one shoulder and against the opposite side under the arm; in this manner it was easily and lightly carried. When tired of carrying it on one shoulder it would be shifted over to the other. At a halt for a few minutes it was used as a cushion to sit on. It was found to be, on fatiguing marches, a great relief from the much despised knapsack with its cutting straps and awkward, back heavy burden."

A soldier of the Confederate Army of Northern recounted,

"I had a very good oilcloth haversack to carry my rations in, a tin cup, a splendid rubber cloth, and blanket, a pair of jeans drawers, and a pair of woolen socks; ...The socks and the drawers were placed on the blanket, the blanket was rolled up with the rubber cloth on the outside, the ends drawn together and fastened with a short strap. To carry this, we put it over our head and let it hang from the shoulder."

An alternative to the "horse collar" is to make a "hobo roll" and tie both ends with a U-shaped piece of period-correct rope. Sling the rope "U" off one shoulder and carry it on your back. This will wear on your shoulders more, but avoids the discomfort caused by a blanket roll across your chest and back when marching in warm weather.

While blanket rolls were widely used, knapsacks were not universally discarded either, as evidenced by a sergeant in the Army of the Potomac's 155th New York following the battle of Reams Station:

"I got off [away from the advancing Confederates] with three more from our company. I did not lose one article of my things. All the others flung everything off them [in their attempt to escape]. I took my knapsack, haversack, musket, and canteen all right, besides three days provisions with me."

It is interesting that, not only did this veteran sergeant still have a knapsack in late August, 1864, he also valued it enough to hang onto, even at the risk of being captured.

During the preparation of this article, the writer packed his knapsack and haversack as with the items listed above and then weighed each. The haversack contained *two* days' rations of salt pork, hardtack, and coffee with a total weight per Army regulations of 3.7 lb., along with a few haversack "stuffers" and mess gear, including a tin dipper attached to the outside of the haversack. The total weight of the haversack was 5.7 lb.

The knapsack was packed with a blanket, gum blanket, period-correct shelter half, greatcoat, towel, one pair of socks, forty "blank" cartridges, a small journal book and pencils, sewing kit, hygiene items, and a rosary. The weight of the full knapsack was

17.5 lbs. and, when the greatcoat was removed, the weight of the knapsack was 14.0 lb.

How does the reenactor's packing list stack up against the Army of the Potomac's marching load at the beginning of the Chancellorsville campaign? The answer: fairly well. The reproduction items weighed included only two days' rations, plus a gum blanket



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and the weight of the haversack and knapsack proper. The Board of Officers' recommendations included three days' full rations in the haversack; in the knapsack were five days' rations of hardtack, 2 lbs. of clothing (which the writer assumed were of approximately equal in weight to a pair of socks and a shelter half), and a wool blanket.

Note that the Board of Officers' recommended load does not include the weight of a gum blanket, which was carried by all soldiers of the Army of the Potomac during the Chancellorsville campaign, or the weight of the haversack and knapsack themselves. The Board's recommended load includes about 7.9 lbs. of food not in the reenactor's haversack and knapsack, while the weight of the reenactor's gum blanket, haversack, and knapsack totaled about 7.5 lbs. The reenactor's journal book, forty blank cartridges, and other nick-knacks more than account for the difference of 0.4 lbs. Therefore, it was concluded that the packing list included in this article is fairly period-correct. Further, the writer asserts, based on personal experience, that it is sufficient for protection from the elements and includes enough food for a two-day reenactment.

For copious quartermasters' reports on how the Board of Officers' recommendations fared on campaign see, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records*

of the Union and Confederate Armies, Volume 25, Part 2, pages 544-559.

The items listed above are what a real Civil War soldier would have had on campaign. Note that the list does not include a whiskey flask, lantern, ammunition box, tent poles, camp stools, multiple blankets, canned food, railroad spikes for tent stakes, or other useless items that do nothing but add bulk and weight to your campaign-kit and detract from your historical accuracy. Try reenacting with the packing list included in this article, and you will be surprised at how easy it is, how comfortable you'll be, and how authentic you'll feel.

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